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Front & Center / By Elaine Hopkins

Whirlwind relationship results in red tape tangle

MACOMB — Each time a headline tells of new violence in the Middle East, Karoll Smith wonders whether she ever again will see Mohamed Ahmed Almaoui.

In November 1980, Karoll married Almaoui in Macomb after a whirlwind, week-long courtship.

They spent a few weeks together, then in February 1981, he left for Lebanon to attend to family business.

For reasons Karoll never was able to learn, the federal government refuses to issue her husband a visa to return.

Her letters to everyone — President Reagan, Congressmen Railsback and Findley, the League of Arab States, and anyone else she could think of who might help — were answered politely.

But no aid has come. Instead, she has been referred to the Chicago office of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service — an office with a constantly busy phone.

Time passed. The shooting intensified in Lebanon. An immigration officer in Chicago told Karoll if she divorced her husband, he would fall under a new classification and might be able to re-enter the United States.

In April 1982, Karoll, 40, obtained the divorce, all the while writing Almaoui to explain what was happening and hoping that he understood.

Almaoui, 31, an engineer, found work in Qatar, another Mideast country rich with oil. But after the divorce, he stopped answering her letters. Karoll kept writing, hoping that a man from another culture, whose native tongue was not English, would comprehend the complexities of U.S. law and policy.

Karoll says she met Almaoui through his brother, a WIU student she met while taking courses on the campus. She is the mother of two teen-age girls from a previous marriage and working as a nurse with the gerontology program at McDonough District Hospital.

"I've always been fascinated by the Middle East," she says. A deeply religious Christian, she believes, "God intended the purpose of my life to be working in the Middle East."

But politics keeps intruding into Karoll's personal life. After getting to know several WIU students from Middle East-

ern countries, and before she met her husband, Karoll became concerned about their apparent anti-American rhetoric and their support for the Palestine Liberation Organization.

She contacted the Central Intelligence Agency and offered to keep an eye on the students.

Without any other comment, the CIA sent her an employment application which she filled out and returned. She never heard another word from the CIA, but kept sending accounts of what she had seen and heard on the campus.

Karoll wonders now if her patriotic impulse may have a bearing on the United States refusal to let her husband back in the country.

She says he and his Lebanese family are non-political, but sometimes she felt "he was involved in something. I didn't know what."

While her husband was in the United States, he took a business trip to Texas, where she joined him. He appeared to be frightened, she said. "He handed me a can of Mace and said 'don't answer the door.'"

Was he involved in a conspiracy of

some sort? Or just afraid because of the crime rate?

In a fit of frustration and anger at the bureaucratic red tape, after she could not find out why the United States refused to let her husband back in the country, Karoll wrote the federal government, renounced her citizenship and sent in her passport.

Again, she got no reply.

Last week, after six months of silence, Karoll received a letter from Almaoui — who still is working in Qatar. He asked her to join him there and be remarried.

She estimates the trip would cost \$1,200, money she does not have and he did not offer to send.

Instead, Almaoui suggested she apply to work as a nurse in Qatar, at a hospital there or for the royal family.

But Karoll, who resides in Galesburg and is moving to Macomb soon, has one married daughter expecting a baby next spring and another daughter who is a freshman in college.

Her family obligations could delay her journey to the Middle East.

To Almaoui's proposal for remarriage, Karoll says "I said 'yes,' but there are a good many things that have to be worked out."

Among those is clearance from the INS for multiple visits in and out of the United States for both of them, she says.

For the future, she hopes they will be remarried, establish a home, and buy a small business to run in the United States.

Of her experience so far, Karoll says "it's been unbelievable."